

Prior Learning, Assessment and Recognition: Options for the Workplace and the Workforce

A Literature Review



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I. Introduction

A. Background Information

The field of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) includes the recognition of both prior formal and informal learning with emphasis traditionally being on the former. Meyers and Morrissey in their 2007 discussion paper indicate that RPL has traditionally focused on recognition of prior formal learning in areas such as credit transfer, foreign credentials and trades certificates. However, they emphasize the need to move beyond the recognition of formal learning to include the recognition of the vast amount informal and experiential learning that adults acquire.

Meyers and Morrissey describe Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition/Portfolio Learning (PLAR/PL) as linked to this formal system of recognizing prior learning. Adults can get recognition and credit for the informal and experiential learning they have gained not only for further education but a host of other of other goals that relate to employment and work related objectives as well as community life.¹

Similarly, Van Kleef points out that learning is acquired at the workplace and in other aspects of life as well as than through educational institutions.² She notes that the greatest use of Prior Learning and Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is in post secondary institutions “to determine eligibility for program enrolment and academic credit, and to assist adult learners in developing meaningful personal, educational, or career plans.”³ In Manitoba, the provincial government describes PLAR as a process used to identify, document, assess and recognize skills and knowledge.⁴

Prior Learning, Assessment and Recognition/Portfolio Learning PLAR/PL is described as linked to this formal system of learning where adults can get recognition and credit for the informal and experiential learning they have gained. It is also described as part of a continuum of life-long learning that is critical for the maintenance of Canada’s current

¹ See Meyers and Morrissey’s 2007 paper *Shifting the Discourse: Mobilizing adult learning in Canada. A discussion paper.*

² See *Strengthening PLAR: Integrating theory and practice in post secondary institutions* at <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/BEE4E097-4DF8-4960-8779-F4EA6D0CE52A/0/JARLArticle5sept07.pdf>

³Ibid. See page 2.

⁴ See Manitoba government Web site at <http://www.gov.mb.ca/tce/jobseek/plar.html>

standard of living, addressing the learning challenges of potential workers, and addressing the needs of non-traditional or non-academic learners.⁵

There is a range of ways that PLAR is carried out. These ways include using very traditional, formal, and rigorous models to very informal, non-traditional ones. In post secondary institutions, PLAR may involve looking at criteria and competencies and using several assessors to come up with a score. . This can be thought of as **Large R Recognition**. In other cases, portfolios may be used including oral portfolios that speak to the knowledge and skills of individuals . This is an example of small r recognition.

In the 2004 report *RPL and the mature age job seekers*,⁶ Cameron describes two ends of a continuum for RPL—at one end there is the credential-credit exchange model and at the other, the developmental/empowerment model. At the credentialing end of the continuum, RPL is seen as an assessment (of many types) with an outcome, while at the other end of the continuum there is a focus on learning and development processes without a concern about credit outcomes. In the developmental model, building self-confidence and self-direction are seen as primary outcomes rather than secondary ones. Building self-confidence and self-direction are seen as prerequisites for preparing learners for further learning and the labour market. An individual who then reaches for new opportunity successfully, such as getting a job, is said to have been recognized. This form of recognition represents **small r recognition**.

The recent discussion paper *Shifting the discourse: Mobilizing adult learning in Canada* discusses a pan-Canadian framework for PLAR and Portfolio Learning (PL). The importance of considering the needs of those adults who possess a great deal of informal and experiential learning, but who have been most disadvantaged by the formal education system, is highlighted. Moreover, the value of a holistic approach to learning beyond formal education is emphasized. The paper acknowledges that a framework must consider RPL in all its forms.

While research indicates that most adults are learning constantly, many do not or are not able to pursue formal education. Adults who face barriers include those with literacy challenges, Aboriginal adults, persons with disabilities, older workers, and newcomers. Cost of tuition and time to learn, as well as work and life responsibilities are familiar barriers to participating in organized education.⁷

⁵ See *Shifting the Discourse: Mobilizing adult learning in Canada. A discussion paper*.

⁶ See *RPL and the mature age job seekers* at <http://www.ala.asn.au/research/2004-11-CameronFullReport.pdf>

⁷ See Meyers and Morrissey's 2007 paper *Shifting the Discourse: Mobilizing adult learning in Canada*.

The Australian experience indicates that providers of PLAR need to offer a range of flexible processes and strategies and that the information on the process needs to be in clear language so it is accessible to everyone. Providers need to use alternative methods such as portfolio development instead of academic evidence-gathering methods, and use holistic forms of assessment that are tailored to the needs of individuals and organizations.⁸

Within a workplace context, there is a tension between informal and more formal methods of PLAR in terms of what will work best. These tensions include what workplaces can bear in terms of time and cost and what methods will or will not benefit the individuals involved in PLAR. Formal models, such as the ones used in post-secondary settings, tend not to work in the workplace context because they are too cumbersome and cannot be maintained. However, employers tend to reject the portfolio method.

In the workplace, employers may informally look at recognizing skills (small r— recognition) in terms of promoting people or offering them different kinds of jobs that fit these skill sets. One of the issues with PLAR in the workplace is how to operationalize a process that is fair and legitimate but something the workplace can manage, given that formal, rigorous models cannot be maintained in a workplace context. The other issue is how the lack of a formal process for PLAR in the workplace advantages or disadvantages an individual over a more formal process, given the increased need for post-secondary education and formal credentials.

Finally, in *Shifting the Discourse: Mobilizing adult learning in Canada*, Meyers and Morrissey underline the potential for PLAR in the workplace as a means to building a culture of learning, along with making the connections between formal education, workplace training, and informal learning. They indicate that a supportive policy environment and new program supports could expand the work in PLAR already undertaken by business and employer groups, unions, and others.

⁸ See *Recognition of prior learning at a glance* at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nd2102g.pdf>.

B. Objectives of the Literature Review

The objectives of the literature review were to:

- identify the range of ways that PLAR has been used (both in the workplace and outside) from formal to informal, along with the advantages and disadvantages of the methods for both individuals and organizations
- act as a starting point to analyze what kinds of approaches might work best in the workplace, both to the advantage of the employer and individuals who participate in PLAR
- examine research that has taken place in a Canadian context along with research that has taken place internationally to determine whether there is a need for a Phase 2, which would involve primary research with key informants

C. Key Questions

The key question this literature review seeks to answer is whether or not individuals are disadvantaged by shorter or abbreviated forms of PLAR. In order to answer this question the literature reviews seeks to answer the following sub-questions:

1. Why is PLAR important to employers and workers?
2. What would motivate employers and workers to get involved in PLAR?
3. What are some of the experiences with PLAR overall that could shed light on workplace-related PLAR?
4. What are the experiences with PLAR in the workplace—advantages and disadvantages from both an employer and worker perspective?
5. What is missing from the literature in terms of what still needs an answer?

II. Methodology

Many national and provincial Web sites of organizations involved in PLAR were reviewed as a starting point for the literature review. Well-known databases on adult learning for PLAR research and documents were also surveyed. These include the following:

- Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA)
- Canadian Council on Learning
- Canadian Labour Congress
- Centre for Education and Work
- Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
- Conference Board of Canada
- ERIC Database
- National Adult Literacy Database (NALD)
- National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)
- National Institute for Literacy
- National Literacy Secretariat
- Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPal)

Reference lists from key documents accessed from academic journal databases including informaworld, ProQuest, and JSTOR were also reviewed for primary sources, particularly those related to PLAR and the workplace. In addition, further searches using Google, Google Scholar, using the following key word combinations were conducted:

- evaluating workplace learning
- assessing workplace learning
- workplace learning assessment
- prior learning assessment AND work
- PLAR in workplace
- PLA at work
- Advantages of PLA AND work
- Disadvantages of PLA AND work
- formal process for PLA
- skills and knowledge profile
- recognition of prior learning

III: Findings

A. Introduction

This literature review focuses specifically on reports and studies related to PLAR and credentialing learning that can shed light on the key question of whether or not individuals are disadvantaged by shorter or abbreviated forms of PLAR and what options might work best for the workplace.

According to a recent state of the field report on PLAR, there is very little research to show what is working for individuals and employers for workplace PLAR. Wihak reports in the 2005 *State of the field report on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*⁹ that there is limited research on PLAR and the workplace, even though the workplace is a key place of learning and that many people get their formal and informal learning through work. Moreover, Wihak indicates that most of the research focuses on the *need* for PLAR in the workplace rather than the outcomes for employers and workers and what PLAR processes worked. The 2004 Australian report *RPL in enterprise-based RTOs: How does it work?* echoes the scarcity of research available on the uptake of skills recognition in the workplace.

The *State of the field report* concludes with generalizations drawn from the literature that Canadians have a great deal of learning acquired through work which has gone unrecognized and that few Canadian workers understand what PLAR is and how they might benefit from it. Similarly, the Conference Board of Canada reports that PLAR has not been widely accepted as part of the workplace or educational institutions.¹⁰ In their report *Canadian adults' interest in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR): A 2004 national survey*,¹¹ Livingstone, Raykov, and Turner also emphasize the limited use of PLAR in most institutions including the workplace. This finding was confirmed with respect to the workplace as an avenue for PLAR in *Feedback from learners: A second cross-Canada study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*.¹² Colleges participating in two studies over 8 years indicated that growth in workplace PLAR did not happen, except in the case of the Canadian military.

⁹ See 2005 *State of the field report on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* at <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/33631C80-A67B-4AF5-A37F-D53C8A756380/0/PLARfinalreportMarch26E.pdf>

¹⁰ See Conference Board of Canada's *Exploring the learning recognition gap in Canada* at <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/education/reports/pdfs/RecogLearn.pdf>

¹¹ See *Canadian adults' interest in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR): A 2004 national survey* at http://www.recognitionforlearning.ca/pdf/PLAR_Interest_REPORT.pdf

¹² See *Feedback from learners: A second cross-Canada study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* at http://www.recognitionforlearning.ca/resources/CCstudy_II.php

An earlier paper to this literature review commissioned by the Manitoba government on workplace PLAR reported that although PLAR has an important role to play in the workplace, there is no complete PLAR process that can be used specifically in the workplace.¹³

In the study *RPL in enterprise-based RTOs: How does it work?*¹⁴ the authors indicate that most prior learning recognition work in industrialized countries focuses on assessment of prior learning to gain access to formal education and training. PLAR in the workplace is purported to take place in Canada, Scotland, and Australia where employees can gain skills through recognition of both formal and informal learning. This report indicates that there is a debate in the Australian literature about the differences between recognition of prior learning versus recognition of current competencies.

The *State of the field report on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* discusses the relationship between PLAR and apprenticeship. The authors note that currently a trades person can pursue accreditation through having their work experience recognized and by taking a challenge exam to get their Inter-provincial Red Seal designation which would allow them to work anywhere in Canada. However, they also identify challenges including the fact that assessment processes are subjective, lack flexibility and are uneven across trades. They also note that those going into apprenticeships need to be better recognized for their non formal and informal learning. The importance of PLAR processes especially for older workers going into apprenticeships or seeking accreditation is suggested by the review. The review of the literature on PLAR and apprenticeship shows the need for national standards and coordination of PLAR practices to get full value from PLAR.

In addition, the report indicates that regulatory bodies in Ontario for nurses, midwives and certified accountants have been involved in PLAR but little information is available.

The *State of the field report on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* also emphasizes the importance of PLAR in recognizing not only the credentials of internationally trained workers coming to Canada but also their experience. The report underlines the difficulty for immigrants in getting recognition and the potential for PLAR in addressing this difficulty. The authors report that there are initiatives underway to develop e-portfolio systems that immigrants can participate in as part of their

¹³ See *Workplace Prior Learning, Assessment and Recognition – The Manitoba Report 2002*

¹⁴ See *RPL in enterprise-based RTOs: How does it work?* at

http://www.aveira.org.au/Conference_Archives/2004/documents/PA057Bedggood.PDF

immigration process in coming to Canada. The findings also show that PLAR is generally not understood or used by the immigrant population even though PLAR could be of benefit to them.¹⁵ In a survey with newcomers in Saskatchewan, immigrants participating could not differentiate between licensing procedures and PLAR.¹⁶

Other countries notably England has taken steps to develop processes mostly through portfolio development to identify and recognize the occupational experience as well as education and training that immigrants and refugees bring, to help them find employment related to their skills and experience. The findings suggest that both training and education, and support from a career counsellor are necessary to document and recognize this training and education.¹⁷

Other findings of interest are that Aboriginal organizations in Canada are involved in PLAR but the scope of that activity is not known. Evidence from New Zealand indicates that PLAR must be culturally appropriate to benefit Aboriginal adults.¹⁸

The *State of the field report on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* concludes with the argument there is little research on PLAR approaches used related to work, costs of workplace PLAR, and the outcomes for workers and employers. As well, Wihak recommends that a key area for further research is the processes being used in the workplace and the costs as well as benefits of PLAR in the workplace.

B. Importance of PLAR to Employers, Labour and Individuals

i. Importance to employers

The need to formally recognize the skills and knowledge of workers is well articulated in the Conference Board of Canada report: *Exploring the learning recognition gap in Canada*.¹⁹ The authors report that the learning recognition gap (the amount of learning recognized and credentialed versus the amount that is unrecognized) is growing in

¹⁵ See 2005 *State of the field report on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* at <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/NR/rdonlyres/33631C80-A67B-4AF5-A37F-D53C8A756380/0/PLARfinalreportMarch26E.pdf>

¹⁶ See Shmyer's 2003 report *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the newcomer community: A needs assessment*

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ See *Exploring the learning recognition gap in Canada* at <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/education/reports/pdfs/RecogLearn.pdf>

Canada. They state that, at the same time, today's employers put more value on knowledge and skills in today's workplace in the face of global competition and economic change. However, when learning goes unrecognized, employers are unable to maximize their talent and may waste resources training employees unnecessarily. Benefits of PLAR for employers include ways to optimize productivity and innovation, increase profitability, and create a structure for training and education and career development.²⁰ Along the same vein, research from Australia cites benefits such as better-targeted training, increased ability to deal with workplace change and a more qualified workforce.²¹

However, any discussion of workplace PLAR must consider the fact that current research shows that employer investment in training of their employees is not adequate.²²

From a Human Resource Management (HRM) point of view, PLAR can be seen as a tool to recognize the skills of both current and potential employees for the purposes of recruitment, career planning, performance development, and succession planning. Moreover, direct benefits from links between PLAR and HRM include building an inventory of talent, addressing future skills shortages, and focusing competency development on where it is needed.²³

ii. Importance to labour

A labour view of PLAR wants to see that workers' life experiences and work skills are formally recognized through academic credits so that their education and training is portable and transferable. Along with skills-portability and academic and school credits, labour also sees other benefits of PLAR for workers, such as better access to relevant training and education, enhanced career and job opportunities, and recognition of existing skills. Labour views PLAR as important for workers who experience the most disadvantage, not just those who are already skilled. Importantly, labour sees PLAR as a tool to recognize the unrecognized skills of immigrants.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See *RPL in enterprise-based RTOs: How does it work?*

²² See Draft discussion paper *Shifting the Discourse: Mobilizing adult learning in Canada*.

²³ See Gwen Wodja's *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and Human Resource Management (HRM)*.

²⁴ See the Canadian Labour Congress' *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR): A Statement of labour values* at http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~plar/values/labour_movement.html

iii. Importance to individuals

According to the Conference Board of Canada report, one key benefit of recognized learning for individuals is the transferability of that learning. The Conference Board report suggests that this recognition must include credentials and accreditation to ensure transferability. The authors report that formally credentialed learning correlates positively in terms of career success, promotion, income, and personal and professional development. However, they do note that often employer-specific credentials may not be recognized by other employers. When individuals' learning is not recognized, this can lead to underemployment and lack of opportunities for development. In addition, these individuals may have less job mobility, less income, and may be more likely to lose their job.²⁵

In a follow-up report, the Conference Board of Canada estimated that recognizing learning could mean more income for Canadians annually in the area of \$4.1 billion to \$5.9 billion. In terms of individuals, this would mean an average increase of \$8,000–\$12,000 per individual. The Conference Board indicated that those most likely to benefit from PLAR are immigrants, those with prior learning through work and training, and people who transfer between post-secondary institutions and provinces.²⁶

PLAR is seen as a critical importance for workers in transition. This includes workers who take advantage of employment opportunities in other jurisdictions, as well as those workers who move from industries that are downsizing to sectors that are expanding. Workers in transition also include new immigrants, the growing population of Aboriginal peoples, and older workers who are moving to new labour market activities.²⁷

The report *Canadian adults' interest in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR): A 2004 national survey* sheds some light on how adults might see the importance of PLAR. The report indicates that over half of Canadian adults and 62.3% of employed adults would be interested in PLAR if they could get formal acknowledgment for their past learning experiences so they would require fewer courses to finish the program. Not surprisingly, interest in PLAR was higher for those adults with the most barriers to participating in formal education. Barriers included cost, family responsibilities, and lack of time. Contrary to identified need, adults with the least formal education—those without a high school diploma and older adults—express the least

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See The Conference Board of Canada's *The economic benefits of recognizing learning and learning credentials in Canada* at http://www.campuscanada.ca/new/foreign/brain_gain_detailed_findings.pdf

²⁷ draft discussion paper *Shifting the Discourse: Mobilizing adult learning in Canada*.

interest in PLAR. Furthermore, those adults who are more involved in informal learning are more interested in PLAR. Interestingly, those immigrants who arrived between 1991 and 2001 are more interested in PLAR than the Canadian born or immigrants who arrived after that period.

C. Overall Perspectives on PLAR Related to Employers, Unions, and Individuals

i. Employers

Overall, employers are seen as not familiar with the theory and practice of PLAR and appear to have little understanding of how to assess the informal learning of employees seeking promotion or of potential employees. They may also be reluctant to link their organized training activities to the formal education system or to external credentialing.

Wihak's state of the field report on PLAR indicates that employers want a PLAR process that is easy to use, flexible and will achieve the desired results among other factors. The report *Workplace Prior Learning, Assessment and Recognition—The Manitoba Report 2002*²⁸ seconds this notion, stating that to be effective, PLAR must not be too complex or cumbersome and should have real value to both the organization and individual.

The Australian experience also confirms the need to be cost and time effective, while at the same time, being fair. In addition, other features that can encourage PLAR include a clear purpose for it, integrating it into an organization's planning and career pathways, and working with a provider who can apply PLAR specifically to the needs of a particular organization. In addition, barriers need to be recognized upfront. Other important features to encourage PLAR concern stakeholder involvement. This includes ensuring that all stakeholders understand and are committed to PLAR and that they are all part of the review process. Post assessment processes need to be seen as negotiated and equitable.²⁹

The Conference Board report *Exploring the learning recognition gap in Canada* emphasizes that employers will recognize and credit learning no matter where it comes from as long as they see it as “authentic, current, high quality, relevant and trustworthy.” (p. 9). In many occupations, employers will be concerned with professional certification

²⁸ See *Workplace Prior Learning, Assessment and Recognition—The Manitoba Report 2002* at http://www.wplar.ca/mb_report_2002.pdf

²⁹ See NCVER's *Recognition of prior learning at a glance* at <http://www.never.edu.au/research/proj/nd2102g.pdf>.

and licensure. In short, they will be more apt to accept the credentials that are thought to be known and trusted. However, Sangster, of the former Canadian Business and Labour Centre reports that when it comes to credentials assessment issues for the internationally trained, employers are not well-informed.³⁰

These notions seem to be borne out in the findings from employers with respect to discussion on their practices in assessing foreign credentials. For example, when employers recruit in occupations that require formal certification and licensing from provincial agencies, what they will accept is straightforward. In other circumstances, there is a wide range in the way that employers will assess paper credentials from using assessment credentials services to using their informal networks to find out the value of the credentials. A number of employers favour relevant experience and demonstration of skills over paper qualifications. Some firms have developed occupational standards against which any potential employee can be assessed. The findings note that credentials assessment is a not a high priority concern for most employers.³¹

Employers also express concerns about the “shelf life” of qualifications and experience, given the ongoing nature of rapid workplace and industry change—where even those skills recently acquired may be outdated quickly. Some employers may see training as a better option to PLAR when there are major shifts and changes in an industry.³²

ii. Unions

A labour view of PLAR stresses recognition over assessment, a focus on the collective interests of workers rather than the individual worker, and the need for training and education opportunities for workers. From a labour standpoint, the recognition component of PLAR is essential. Labour supports PLAR initiatives with an equity focus that remedies systemic injustices and barriers. Labour values emphasize the need for labour’s input, and labour expects to be involved in joint approaches to PLAR, along with equal representation in organizations that deal with PLAR. PLAR programs must have public funding so that individual workers do not have to pay for it and use their own time to upgrade. Workers also need supports and paid time for learning that is negotiated with the employer. Moreover, confidentiality needs to be a key principle in PLAR programs for workers.

³⁰ See *Assessing and recognizing foreign credentials in Canada: Employers’ view* at http://www.clbc.ca/files/Reports/credentialspaper_e.pdf

³¹ Ibid.

³² See NCVER’s *Recognition of prior learning at a glance*.

Labour principles emphasize the need for PLAR processes that include basic skills and second language programs and is inclusive of unskilled workers who are in most need of training. There is concern about assessment of informal learning that is too narrow or inappropriate, such as competency-based approaches or higher education approaches to assessment that do not fit non-traditional forms of learning. Labour favours a portfolio or other participatory approaches to PLAR where working people's knowledge is respected and recognized.

Moreover, the labour movement is also concerned about harnessing formal recognition and accreditation through college and university credit for the vast amount of labour education that union members receive. The concern is having a PLAR process that fits with this kind of learning rather than traditional forms which require a great deal of literacy skills and serves the interests of these workers.³³

Importance of meaningful credentials

A recent evaluation by the Labour Education Centre (LEC) can shed some light on the importance of credentials for unionized workers. The research concerned three groups of unionized workers who participated in a Return to Learn program offered by LEC. All workers were aiming to get some kind of credential. One group was maintenance workers and cooks (all speakers of other languages with training and education from their home countries) in the hospitality industry who had a multitude of experience in their trades but no credentials. They were interested in getting their Red Seal.³⁴ The two other groups—union staff representatives, and public housing maintenance and clerical workers—were involved in LEC's *Passport to Learning Program*.³⁵ *Passport to Learning* is a 240-hour labour studies certificate program created by the Labour Education Centre and its education partner George Brown College. *Passport to Learning* is aimed at unionized workers who have a wealth of experience and knowledge, but who may be intimidated to go back to school. The program is intended to create access for workers who would not normally attend college or university. Participants in the program can get credit toward their certificate through courses that they have already taken through their own union and other courses they wish to take.

The majority of these workers got involved in the *Return to Learn* program so they could change jobs, get better compensation, get more challenging work, and be able to advance.

³³ See the Labour Education Centre's *A union passport to learning: A review of the literature* at http://www.triencommunications.com/publications/files/a_union_passport_to_learning_lit_rev_final.pdf.

³⁴ See Labour Education Centres' report *Return to Learn research and evaluation report* (in press).

³⁵ See LEC's *Passport to Learning program* at <http://www.lec-passporttolearning.org/Courses/outlines.htm>

Those with a trade felt that getting certified would allow them more job opportunities. Others saw that getting a certificate through *Passport to Learning* would be a stepping stone for potential long-term plans to enrol in specific college programs.³⁶

Similarly, the Canadian Union of Public Employees' publication *It's our right: A showcase of workplace education programs and learner stories* also shows the importance of recognized credentials and academic credits for many working people. The document highlights eight cases where joint union-management workplace basic skills programs were offered across Canada. In five of the programs, workers in the programs had a chance to work on their GED or get their Grade 12. Participants stress the importance of getting their GED to getting other jobs and continuing their learning. In one case, a Grade 12 diploma helped workers in the health care sector who were laid off get different jobs or go back to school. Another key benefit was increased confidence and self esteem. In two provinces, participants joined the programs to work on skills so they could write mandatory tests to get certified as water workers.³⁷

In both cases, the reports stress the importance of a joint process to ensure that workers' needs are met and not undermined. The reports also document the apprehension that people feel when they join such a program after being out of school for a long time.

iii. Individuals

When people cannot get their learning formally recognized, they may have to take additional testing or repeat learning. This takes money and time and tends to discourage people from formal learning. These kinds of costs occur for both those with Canadian experience and those with experience, credentials, and learning from elsewhere. Another barrier is that recognition through PLAR may not be transferable to other organizations or provinces. Additional barriers that affect workers are that employers may not recognize their foreign education, professional or trades credentials, prior learning from other workplaces, experience or alternative forms of education.³⁸

In its literature review, the Australian *RPL in enterprise-based RTOs: How does it work?* notes the apparent barriers for learners who try to access PLAR in the workplace. These barriers are echoed in some of the Canadian findings. Lack of awareness about availability, the complexity of the process, time to collect evidence, and lack of clarity

³⁶ See CUPE's *It's our right: A showcase of programs and learner stories*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See The Conference Board of Canada's *The economic benefits of recognizing learning and learning credentials in Canada* at http://www.campuscanada.ca/new/foreign/brain_gain_detailed_findings.pdf

about skills recognition limit PLAR's uptake. The need for support for learners who have their formal, non-formal, and informal learning recognized was emphasized as a means to addressing barriers.

The Australian experience suggests that to encourage individuals to get involved, PLAR processes need to be more client-friendly and less paper-based. Presently these processes place great demands on candidates. Other barriers include the fact that the processes are not culturally sensitive and require significant English language skills. Approaches such as on-line and telephone support, group processes, information sessions, and workshops are recommended, along with a shift to learner-centred rather than teacher-directed approaches.³⁹

Interestingly, some other Australian research has concluded that equity groups would be more interested in participating in training than PLAR because of the benefits they would receive from training such as the social and supportive aspects of the course, along with the opportunity to build confidence. In addition, the paradox of PLAR for disadvantaged groups is explained in that those with little formal education and training need knowledge of these systems in order to prepare a successful application.

PLAR in the college system

Results from the 1999 study *A slice of the iceberg: Cross-Canada study on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*⁴⁰ indicate that one of the major motivations for learner participation in PLAR at the college level was that people were required to upgrade their credentials for employment purposes. This was confirmed in the 2003 follow-up study *Feedback from learners: A second cross-Canada study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* where most PLAR participants had employment-related reasons for being involved, and where part-time students were interested in a credential to further their career prospects.

Learners in the college system indicated that, through PLAR, they could shorten their programs, reduce duplication of training to get Canadian credentials, keep their full-time jobs, and save money.⁴¹

³⁹ See NCVER's *Recognition of prior learning at a glance*.

⁴⁰ See *A slice of the iceberg: Cross-Canada study on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* at http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/45/48.pdf

⁴¹ Ibid.

Learners in the study had suggestions to improve the PLAR process; one of their main concerns was a lack of feedback after their assessment. They also recommended more information be provided on PLAR and its objectives, more consistency in application, support through the process, and assessors who are experienced in the field they are assessing. In the same study, PLAR assessors discussed barriers that would affect learners undertaking PLAR. Some of these barriers included administrative red tape, unclear policies, and PLAR policies not aligned with other institutional practices (i.e., PLAR processes being more expensive than the course).

In the 2003 follow up study *Feedback from learners: A second cross-Canada study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*, the authors found that the greatest difficulties with PLAR were cost, length of time of the assessment, and lack of information. Bad timing, along with the complexity and time-consuming nature of the process, were factors for those learners who investigated PLAR but decided not to go ahead with it. For non-PLAR learner to consider the process, it would need to be less costly, a more simplified process and their own circumstances would have to change.

Workplace PLAR

In Australia, workplace PLAR is seen as a way that individuals can reduce training-time and costs by applying for PLAR as an individual to an institution that grants PLAR. Workplace PLAR is seen as a way to cut down on assessment time, offer the convenience of on-site assistance, and reduce the costs to employees and employers while still keeping the rigour of the process.⁴²

D. Employers and Workers' Experiences with PLAR

This section outlines what is known about actual experience and practice with workplace PLAR, including benefits and barriers for both unemployed and employed workers and for employers.

i. Examples of Canadian workplace initiatives

The Province of Manitoba has been a recognised leader in Workplace Prior Learning and Assessment for almost a decade. In 2007, Manitoba's WPLAR coordinator commissioned follow up research to review and evaluate the major PLAR projects of

⁴² See Hargreaves' *Recognition of prior learning at a glance*

WPLAR's partner companies and organizations. The findings indicated that these companies are documenting existing and new employees' essential skills and giving credit for prior learning. Both employers and workers were seen as benefiting from the process. The results also indicated that individuals were very positive about their experiences with PLAR.

Employers involved in the follow up research see the value of PLAR to their organizations. The main changes they have seen since implementing PLAR is that they have clear, objective standards and requirements for skills and competencies and these are clearer for employees. In addition, there is a broader understanding of formal prerequisites and more of an emphasis on knowledge and skills that individuals bring to the job and how these align with organization requirements. This includes a broader understanding and recognition of what employees bring from outside of work. As a result of PLAR, there is also more of an emphasis on providing courses and training to address the skills employees need and build on what they have.

In terms of unintended outcomes, organizations learned about Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing, the skills that the workforce brought and what training was being offered in relation to these skills.⁴³

In the words of one respondent who participated in the follow up, "Understanding PLAR especially different ways to recognize learning both internally and externally are ways for industry to retain its workforce in times of skills shortages."⁴⁴

The former Canadian Business and Labour Centre reports on employers' experience assessing international credentials. However, most of the information is on professionals requiring licensure and high levels of education with at least one degree, including information technologies (IT) and medical professions. However, for the purposes of this literature review there are two cases of interest.

One case outlined is an Aerospace company in Manitoba. The firm has implemented PLAR based on workers and potential workers' actual competencies and abilities rather than on paper qualifications. The company implemented PLAR to address a shortage of aerospace workers, knowing that there were workers from other industries who had transferable skills. The process can be used with any candidate with Canadian experience

⁴³ See *Reflections: The PLAR Process* by Proactive Information Service Inc for Manitoba's WPLAR committee.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Page 2.

or experience outside of Canada. Each candidate does a hands-on assessment with a technical person. The assessment determines whether the candidate is qualified for the job or needs more training. If more training is needed, it is arranged. This PLAR process is used for new hires and for those who want to move to other jobs in the company. Unfortunately, there is no information on the results for individuals and the company over time, nor are there descriptions of challenges in such a process.⁴⁵

A second case concerns a pulp and paper company in Saskatchewan that has developed 21 critical factors it feels employees need have in order to operate on the job. Employees were assessed against these factors and were provided training on areas in which they needed more skills. The assessment considered each employee's experience and training history, both in and outside the company in its approach to skills possessed and skills needing improvement. This process is used for any employee—with Canadian experience or not. Again, there is no information on the impact on the organization of participating employees.⁴⁶

In Prince Edward Island, Workplace Education PEI used a Prior Learning Assessment Portfolio (PLA) Development Process to research areas on Essentials Skills and Prior Learning Assessment related to apprenticeship in PEI. One finding from the research was that PEI needs an integrated apprenticeship strategy to address the shortage of skilled trades. In follow up to the research, Workplace Education PEI and the PEI Provincial Apprenticeship Board responded to identified industry needs by developing two workplace programs for cooks and plumbers who wanted to challenge Red Seal exams. The pass rate increased from 34.6% to 76.5% for those who took the programs and took the challenge exams. PEI has developed a strategy for PLA and Essentials Skills. The strategy assists apprentices who need to improve their essential skills and academics, and guides people through the apprenticeship process to certification no matter what their entry point.⁴⁷

The Canadian Labour and Business Centre literature review *A union passport to learning* reports on the joint initiative of the Canadian Steel Trade and Employment Congress (CSTEC) in the early 1990s. Through a three-year, cost-shared agreement with the federal and Ontario governments, CSTEC negotiated a training and accreditation program across the steel industry. Participants could get accreditation from participating

⁴⁵ See the Canadian Labour and Business Centre's *Assessing and recognizing foreign credentials in Canada*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See *Essential Skills and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition: Strengthening the foundation of apprenticeship on PEI*. at <http://www.canadasportfolio.ca/>

colleges/CEGEPs through PLAR for prior learning. Portfolio development and program review were used. Benefits of the partnership were cited as accredited colleges courses, reduced costs and time for training, flexible program delivery, and transferability. Other benefits for workers included greater employment and income security, portable skills development, and a great interest and involvement in learning and training. One of the major challenges was the time it took to develop a partnership with the college system.

ii. Examples of Australian workplace initiatives

There are a number of studies in the Australian context on the experience of workplace PLAR. The 2004 report *RPL in enterprise-based RTOs: How does it work?* focuses on research on six medium-to-large organizations that used PLAR. Four were businesses and two were government departments. The organizations had large workforces, often with employees across Australia. All but one was a Registered Training Organization (RTO).⁴⁸

In these organizations, business drivers and legislative requirements were the motivators for training and assessment. Some training programs were linked to quality systems and required certification. Two organizations wanted to go the route of recognition for certification because of the considerable experience of their ageing workforce. All organizations had improved productivity and more effective business practices as their end goal, even though each organization had very different training needs. The organizations were interested in eliminating redundant training. Recognition for current skills was seen as a benefit to both employers and employees. Recognition tended to be embedded in the training and assessment activities of these organizations.

The six organizations shared similar processes for recognition. These processes included “information sessions, recognition workshops, supply of evidence lists, individual meetings between learners and workplace assessors, negotiated opportunities for recognition assessment to be undertaken, and time during work hours to prepare for their application” (p. 5)⁴⁹. Organizations emphasised the importance of sound recognition processes, staff to implement recognition, and supports for workers seeking recognition. Some organizations provided on-line support. Recognition was applied differently in

⁴⁸ An RTO can deliver nationally-recognized training and can be a private business or a government department. This training is recognized by all other RTOs across Australia and is part of a training packages developed for particular industries. The training results in a qualification that is part of the Australian Qualifications Framework.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

each organization to fit their needs and philosophy. In some cases, recognition was tied to performance of current competencies through a performance appraisal process and would need to be revisited every year.

Employers reported that benefits included the ability to cut down on training, a confirmation of the skills of the workforce, the fostering of a learning culture, and an opportunity to increase everyone's expertise. They also had a pool of qualified workers to draw from when it suited them.

Interestingly, employees faced the same barriers and the need for the same supports as in non-workplace PLAR situations. Barriers included not understanding the recognition process and feeling that they could not put together the evidence required. Employees found the process of putting together a portfolio of evidence complex and time consuming, especially if they had to do it on their own without much support. The most helpful support was that from assessors who could advise on the requirement of recognition.

One of the most important reasons for recognition was the ability to get certified, with one idea that this recognition would help in competition with younger employees for promotions. Other reasons involved the portability outside the organization that workers got through a nationally recognized system. Workers were also able to find out what they knew and what they did not know, along with the opportunity to broaden perspectives. However, recognition did not necessarily guarantee a promotion.

There were a number of negative perceptions on the part of employees. Some workers felt that it was easier to do the training than to put together a portfolio. Others with experience or other qualifications resented the process. In other cases, employees were unhappy with a 5-year time limit on the recognition. As well, some employees found the process humiliating, or felt it was a contradiction to the recruitment process. One employee said, "You are trying to prove that you can do the job you were hired to do in the first place" (p. 9)⁵⁰.

A key organizational barrier was that recognition was not always well understood or supported by all stakeholders.

An important conclusion from this research was that a "one-size-fits-all" approach is

⁵⁰ Ibid.

inappropriate when it comes to recognition, and that the place of recognition in the enterprise's overall business and training plans will always evolve according to the needs of the organization" (p. 10)⁵¹.

Another study *Final report: Enterprise RPL project* looked at recognition of prior learning (RPL) in seven private and public organizations in Australia as part of a project to establish and report on models of workplace RPL. A goal of the project was to identify the opportunities and challenges of working with outside RTOs. Each organization had a different action plan and purpose for undertaking RPL.

Across the seven participating organizations there were a number of aspects of the project that worked well. These aspects included having assessors with industry experience, using practical tasks in pre-assessment activities, providing on-going support and post-assessment feedback to candidates, interactive communication, and quick turn-around on the RPL process from providers. Another important aspect of the projects was to have representatives of all stakeholders involved, starting from before the project began which meant better acceptance from workers and management. In addition, a positive outcome was that the training and development staff within the seven organizations were exposed to new training and development options.

One lesson learned was that timing of RPL depends of what is happening in the organization. Another lesson learned was that assessments and evidence need to be tailored to the work and the culture of organizations making sure that they are not overly redundant or detailed. In addition, outside assessors need to understand not only the industry, but also the workplace context as well as competency-based training. The study reports that it is the quality of interaction between the assessor and the candidate that determines the quality of the assessment. Like the first Australian study cited in this section, the importance of support for candidates was emphasized as was the need for more promotion to employees on the benefits of RPL.

Cost of implementing RPL is a significant issue in terms of developing various support materials for the recognition process including overall information on what RPL is, recording and reporting documentation, and individual training plans. Specific information is needed on possible workplace strategies for RPL, frequently asked questions, and examples of individual training plans.

⁵¹ Ibid.

The study identified several issues that will be important to address if other workplaces are to get involved in RPL. These issues include resources for assessments, the preparedness of outside providers to work with workplaces, costs, and the non-recognition of company expertise, and RPL economies. The integration and use of company expertise as part of companies' human resource management is stressed as a means of reducing costs and time.

Similar to the first Australian study, the authors conclude their study arguing, "There is no single way to provide enterprise RPL—neither is there a single 'best' way for RTOs to undertake RPL assessments. In each case, it requires a willingness to work collaboratively to find a way that best suits the enterprise's needs and context while still meeting the relevant AQTF [Australian Quality Training Framework]⁵² standards" (p. 65)⁵³.

iii. Examples of PLAR for Workers-in-Transition

The Centre for Education and Work conducted a 3-year cross-Canada study on the impact of PLAR strategies for 300 workers-in-transition. Participants took part in a 6-week portfolio course that focused on collecting information for a workplace portfolio to show job knowledge and skills through a variety of sources. Participants articulated goals, values, and experiences and showed evidence of their prior learning. The findings from the study indicated that the outcomes of portfolio development were positive in helping participants prepare to enter the labour market. Participants gained confidence in their skills and experience, were more prepared for the job interview, and had a clearer employment focus. They were also able to identify a broader range of skills they possessed, including new transferable skills, existing skills, along with application to a broader range of employment opportunities. For some participants, the portfolio helped them overcome their lack of formal credentials; others gained more mobility. Other outcomes were that the portfolio helped those making mid-career decisions and immigrants seeking employment in Canada.⁵⁴

⁵² Refers to a national set of standards which assure consistent, high quality educational services for the clients of Australia's vocational and education and training system. The framework sets standards for registration of training providers, for the bodies that regulate and accredit training.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See CEW's *Prior Learning and Recognition final report* at http://www.cewca.org/documents/FinalReporteng_000.pdf

In another example, developed by Oars training Inc., PLAR was used for uncertified and unemployed welders in a pilot project using the Toby model⁵⁵ which includes self-assessment, technical assessment, counselling, training, and recognition. Four laid-off workers self-assessed their skills against core skills determined by employers, went through a technical assessment, got an individual training plan to address gaps, participated in 8 days of training and were able to pass their challenge exam. Participants evaluated the experience positively, saying they had a better understanding of their range of skills, less training time, more confidence and ability to articulate those skills, along with a more positive job search.⁵⁶

Another group of laid-off manufacturing workers in Manitoba also tested the Toby model (Oars training Inc.) In addition to a general self-assessment, participants used an industry-specific self-assessment as well. An assessor used literacy and numeracy tasks to confirm participants' self-assessment. Overall, participants felt the self-assessment was a positive experience. They gained confidence and were better able to articulate their skills. The project identified some gaps in service, including the need for literacy assessment and upgrading for manufacturing requirements that focused on employment rather than academic goals. Other gaps included the need to be able to better demonstrate technical skills for employers and more flexibility in technical programming.

In Australia, Cameron, the author of *RPL and the mature age job seekers* report on current RPL practice and how innovative RPL might assist mature age job seekers. The author found that RPL did not live up to its promise of helping those adults with an abundance of experience but little formal learning. Furthermore, Cameron indicates that, "Those most likely to utilize RPL are students who work fulltime, are established in the workplace and already have significant educational capital to draw from" (p. 6).

Cameron reports that the current forms of RPL are largely print-based, bureaucratic, and time consuming. Current RPL practice is not seen to meet the needs of mature age job seekers, especially those who have not been in the paid workforce or formal learning for some time. These job seekers were seen to need more emphasis on building self-esteem, peer support and job search strategies than on skill recognition or training. The report highlights three examples of alternative RPL that tried to address the issues of these job seekers with alternative forms of RPL that were more developmental rather than just for

⁵⁵ "The Toby model is a client-centred model of workforce development. Its purpose is to offer PLAR services that link worker skills with labour market needs. The individual worker, with his or her skills needs and goals is at the centre of the model." (OARS Training Inc., 2004, p. 2 at http://www.wplar.ca/linking_the_partners.pdf)

⁵⁶ See *PLAR as a workforce development tool: Linking the partners* at http://www.wplar.ca/linking_the_partners.pdf

credit. The author argues for RPL models that focus on the learner and the learning process and are sensitive to the needs of equity groups. With these RPL models there is more of an emphasis on making informed decisions about future learning. Cameron also suggests that RPL can be used at different levels.

One case presented by Cameron focuses on experienced chefs with no qualifications—most of whom were immigrants who did not speak English as a first language and some with literacy and numeracy issues. RPL was part of an initiative called the *Inner City Hospitality Centre* run by the [Multicultural Community Centre](#) (MCC). A certificate program was developed with these chefs in mind by a college partner RTO specialized in hospitality.

The project used a learner-centred small group process in workshops along with observations at restaurants and interviews for the RPL process. The workshops were used to confirm what had been observed. A trainer went to the different workplaces where the chef trainees were working. The learning was very experiential and oral. As a result of the project, all 25 candidates got their certificate and improved their practice and confidence. Some lost their fear of getting more qualifications and went on to get more. Although the case was concerned with a credit outcome, it incorporated elements of a developmental model.

Cameron concludes by suggesting that more of a focus on self and informal levels of recognition would be more suitable for mature job seekers than the current formal recognition process predominantly used in Australia. Mature job seekers need to overcome issues related to self-concept and self-esteem, along with negativity related to ageism and job search strategies. In addition, formal RPL processes assume a certain set of skills and abilities to be successful.

IV. Analysis of the Findings

A. Introduction

Overall, there is scant research on workplace PLAR and less on actual employer and worker experiences using it. The available research focuses on both employed workers and those in transition. There is a general agreement in the literature that PLAR is not well understood by employers or individuals.

Overall, the Australian literature offers the most insights into the challenges and possibilities of PLAR for both employed workers and those in transition. However, across the board, the voices of workers' experiences with PLAR are missing.

In the Canadian literature, there is an indication that workplace PLAR has not been widely accepted or used in the workplace. At the same time, the literature highlights the critical importance of PLAR to both employers and individuals and articulates its benefits. Both Canadian labour and employer points of view highlight the importance of recognizing workers' prior learning through credentials that allow for portability and transferability of skills to other contexts so that workers gain better wages and job opportunities. PLAR is noted to be critical for those workers who are most disadvantaged including immigrants, adults with literacy challenges, Aboriginal people and older workers. At the same time, the literature suggests that these groups have the most difficulty accessing the most current forms of PLAR that mirror the formal education system, and are highly evidenced and paper-based.

Even though there is an emphasis on the importance of credits and credentials and highly formalized PLAR processes, there is an emerging literature that PLAR in all its forms should be considered. This includes recognition of developmental/empowerment approaches to PLAR along with the more common credential-credit exchange approaches or some combination of the two. At the same time, there is concern about credentials or approaches that are workplace-specific and not portable or have a particular shelf life. In the literature, the developmental approach or combination is emphasized with workers in transition.

The literature on experience with workplace PLAR consistently states that there is no "one-size-fits-all" model for the workplace and that organizational context and workplace needs are central to determining what works.

B. Advantages and Disadvantages of Workplace-based PLAR

i. Advantages of PLAR

The literature states clear and consistent benefits of PLAR for both employers and individuals. For employers, the articulated higher-level benefits concern increased efficiency and productivity through a better-trained and flexible workforce, along with maximizing talent and resources. In experience with PLAR, employers indicate that

actual benefits include reducing unnecessary training, knowing the skills of the workforce and fostering a learning culture, and having a pool of skilled workers to draw from. In other cases, PLAR allows employers to assess the transferable skills of workers from other industries during times of skills shortages.

Gaining formally recognized credits is identified as an important issue for working people. Unions and many workers are concerned about getting formally-recognized credits for worker learning. Workers may want to use this accreditation as a stepping stone to new or better job opportunities and pay and other educational opportunities.

For employed workers, benefits of PLAR include being able to potentially cut down on time and cost of training through recognition of prior learning. If workers get a credential for their learning, it is said there is the potential to get better jobs, have portable skills, have more job security, and gain a better income.

For workers in transition, it appears that the benefits of PLAR focus more on being aware of their transferable skills, gaining confidence and self esteem, being better able to articulate their skills to a potential employer, and being able to overcome their lack of formal education. The idea of getting accredited for learning for this group of workers seems less important as a first step with PLAR.

ii. Disadvantages of PLAR

For the most part, PLAR is not well understood by employers. Identified organizational barriers include lack of commitment to PLAR by all necessary stakeholders in the workplace. The concerns that employers have with respect to PLAR are around the time it takes, the cost, and the authenticity of the process. Another concern is that PLAR needs to be integrated into a company's human resource plans and consider other organizational priorities that are taking place.

From a union perspective, disadvantages of PLAR include assessment of informal learning that is too narrow or inappropriate such as competency-based approaches or higher education approaches to assessment that do not fit non-traditional forms of learning.

In the Australian literature, employed workers express disadvantages of PLAR. These disadvantages include the difficulty in putting together a portfolio, time limits on the recognition, the humiliating nature of the process, and the fact that workers are being assessed on what they were hired to do in the first place. Other barriers noted in the

literature were similar to those for other forms of PLAR. These barriers include not understanding the process, lack of support in putting together a portfolio, the complexity of the portfolio process, and time to put together evidence. Although benefits of PLAR are touted as the ability to get better jobs and promotions, there was no evidence of this in the literature.

The literature suggests that formal PLAR processes that are most commonly used privilege those individuals who are already working and already have educational capital. Those with little knowledge of formal education systems, and those with literacy and language challenges would be disadvantaged by the paper-based systems used.

There is a consensus that both employers and workers want a PLAR process that is flexible, easy to use, and cost and time effective. Employers want a process that is tailored to their organizational context and needs. They want the process to be valuable, relevant, trustworthy, and experiential. Unions have different concerns. They issue a strong statement that workers need to be involved in determining the PLAR process through a joint process and that workers need paid time, opportunities, and supports for both PLAR and workplace learning that are negotiated with the employer. They want to make sure that workers get formal recognition for their prior learning, including the labour education that translates into college and university credits. They also stress the need for confidentiality in the process.

C. Principles to Guide Workplace PLAR

The literature reveals that there is no one right way to do workplace-related PLAR. However, there is the suggestion of a set of principles to guide work-related PLAR. These principles are drawn from the literature review and described as follows:

i. Stakeholder involvement in process

The importance of having representatives of stakeholders involved in the process is identified in the Canadian labour principles for PLAR and the Australian experience. Labour literature calls for joint approaches to PLAR involving labour. In the literature based on seven cases in Australia, bringing stakeholders together meant the projects were better accepted by workers and management.

ii. Approach taken is tailored to employer and worker needs

The literature on the Australian experience emphasizes the need to customize the PLAR approach to the needs and circumstances of the organizations involved. Organizations had different drivers for being involved and the experiences with PLAR suggest that approaches need to be tailored to organizational conditions and needs. The idea that outside assessors need to understand both the industry and the specific workplace context was stressed in the Australian experience.

At the same time, the literature pinpoints the fact that workers' needs also must be considered as there have been a number of negative perceptions on the part of employees along with barriers to their involvement.

Similarly, the literature points to the need to understand the circumstances of workers in transition to tailor a PLAR approach to their particular needs.

iii. Holistic and broad approaches over narrow ones

The most recent Canadian literature, and much of the Australian literature advocates for broader PLAR approaches over narrower ones. Recent Canadian literature sponsored by the Canadian Council on Learning emphasizes holistic approaches to learning beyond the formal education and a range of RPL responses. This idea is also underscored in the Australian literature on workers in transition.

Labour principles envision a PLAR approach that remedies systemic injustices and is inclusive of unskilled workers most in need of training. There is concern about approaches that are representative of the formal education system or are competency-based. Labour believes that these approaches may not fit or respect the non-traditional learning of working people.

iv. PLAR process needs to be user-friendly

There is a consensus that both employers and workers want a PLAR process that is flexible, easy to use, and cost and time effective. Employers want a process that is tailored to their organizational context and needs with a clear purpose. They want the process to be valuable, relevant, trustworthy, and experiential. The Australian experience indicates that integration of RPL into the human resource management system and use of company expertise can reduce time and costs.

Workers and workers in transition can be disadvantaged by current PLAR approaches that are heavily evidence- and paper-based. In some of the Australian case studies, workers report they feel overwhelmed by the amount of evidence they have to collect. Some of the research advocates for alternative forms of PLAR to address some of these disadvantages.

v. Ensure supports for PLAR

The literature reflects the need to address barriers of time and costs for workers who undertake PLAR. In the Australian experience, workers were given time at work for the PLAR process. In addition, the literature also emphasizes the need for enough supports for workers and workers in transition to participate. This includes information sessions, workshops, group processes, individual support from assessors, and on-line support.

D. Conclusion

The literature suggests that “lighter” forms of PLAR might disadvantage workers in some cases especially if there is no formal credit that recognizes portable skills or a credential that has limited currency (i.e., a short shelf life or limited recognition outside of the workplace). However, a lighter form of PLAR may be the right solution as a first step—especially in cases that involve workers in transition who experience disadvantage or for some immigrants and refugee seeking to have their skills and experience recognized.

It is also clear from the literature that a stakeholder process should be in place for a PLAR initiative. The needs of the stakeholders must be analyzed in each workplace to see what will work and how the process can be contextualized to that workplace and its workers. The process of stakeholder involvement will be just as important for workers in transition.

The experience with workplace PLAR underlines the idea that there is no one way of doing PLAR that will fit every workplace or work-related situation.

This literature review was not able to fully answer the questions of what are the best options for workplace-related PLAR and what are the forms of PLAR that may disadvantage individuals. This literature review seconds the findings of the 2005 report *State of the Field Report on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*. More Canadian

research is needed on the experience of workers and employers with PLAR. This includes what processes were used, costs, and outcomes, along with challenges and lessons learned. It will be particularly important to hear the voices and experiences of workers and potential workers in determining what forms of PLAR advantage or disadvantage them. It would be helpful to conduct case studies on Canadian projects and workplaces that have focused on workplace-related PLAR to get answers to some of these questions.

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